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ABSTRACT

The ACTFL (American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages) Performance Guidelines for K-12 Learners expand on the second language proficiency guidelines established in 1982 by focusing on second language use by students who participate in elementary, middle, and high school foreign language programs. Unlike adult language users, K-12 students are in a continuous process of cognitive development that influences their ability to perform language tasks, and they acquire their language skills in the controlled environment of the language classroom. The new guidelines take these factors into consideration as they set forth characteristics of language users at the various stages of learning. The materials included here are an introduction to the guidelines and their purpose, organization, and use, and a poster outlining the specific performance criteria for three learner ranges (novice, grade K-4, 5-8, or 9-10; intermediate, grade K-8 or 7-12; and pre-advanced, grade K-12) in six performance areas (comprehensibility, comprehension, language control, vocabulary use, communication strategies, cultural awareness). Within each performance area, criteria are given for interpersonal, interpretive, and presentational performance. (MSE)

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American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages

ACTFL

PERFORMANCE GUIDELINES FOR K-12 LEARNERS

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Why New Guidelines?

For nearly two decades, the *ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines* (1982) have profoundly influenced our profession, first in the area of assessment and second in the area of curriculum development. Even though they were designed to describe language performance of adult-like language users, these guidelines have also been helpful in articulating the kind of language high school users might produce. The *ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines (1982)* assume a certain level of cognitive development with which the language user can perform language tasks and functions and also describe language proficiency regardless of where and how it is acquired.

The *ACTFL Performance Guidelines for K-12 Learners* expand upon the aforementioned guidelines by focusing on second language use by students who participate in elementary, middle and high school foreign language programs. Unlike adult language users, students in the K-12 spectrum are in a continuous process of cognitive development that influences their ability to perform language tasks. Additionally, students acquire their language skills in the controlled and carefully articulated environment of a school classroom. The new *ACTFL Performance Guidelines for K-12 Learners* take these factors into consideration as they set forth characteristics of language users at the various stages or benchmarks of learning and development.

What has heretofore been missing is the answer to the question "how well" should students be expected to do the "what."

Standards for Foreign Language Learning are the **content standards** that define the "what" of foreign language learning in American classrooms. The *ACTFL Performance Guidelines for K-12 Learners* are the **performance standards** that define the "how well." Like *Standards for Foreign Language Learning*, the *ACTFL Performance Guidelines for K-12 Learners* are designed to reflect second language learning that begins in kindergarten and continues in an uninterrupted sequence through Grade 12, reflecting a vision for language learning and language use by American students. Clearly, more American school districts now offer longer sequences of foreign language than ever before. However, a 13-year uninterrupted program of foreign language study is not commonly found in this country as the 20th century draws to a close.

While designed to describe language use by students who articulate along the 13-year continuum of language learning set forth by *Standards for Foreign Language Learning*, language professionals whose students do not travel on a 13-year continuum will still find the *ACTFL Performance Guidelines for K-12 Learners* useful since they account for various entry points that reflect most major language sequences found in the United States. Users of the *K-12 Guidelines* will be able to identify language performance descriptions for their students who fit into any of the following configurations: K-4; K-8; K-12; 5-8; 5-12; 9-10; 9-12.

What Are these Guidelines Intended to Do?

Standards for Foreign Language Learning have answered the question of "what" should be taught in American foreign language classrooms. Subsequent efforts by states and local school districts have further defined what should be taught to American students learning foreign languages. Such standards are known as "content standards." What has heretofore been missing is the answer to the question "how well" should students be expected to do the "what." These guidelines, or "performance standards," provide information to teachers and administrators about how well students can be expected to do the "what" from the content standards.

It cannot be expected, therefore, that students learning the less commonly taught languages will reach the same level of performance in all modes of communication as those who study the western languages more frequently offered in American schools.

The *ACTFL Performance Guidelines for K-12 Learners* were developed to help foreign language educators better understand the developmental path that second language learning takes when it occurs within a school setting. More exposure to language and culture content, as provided by the classroom teacher, is a major factor in language acquisition by students. Varying learning speeds, biases to certain learning styles and the general language learning ability of students also affect how well a second language is learned. The language performance descriptions contained in these *Guidelines* are designed to help teachers understand how well students demonstrate language ability at various points along the language learning continuum.

Hopefully, using the *ACTFL Performance Guidelines for K-12 Learners* will alleviate the pressure experienced by many foreign language educators to achieve unrealistic goals in short periods of instructional time. Students require carefully planned and well-sequenced learning opportunities that provide practice in using the language in order to internalize language competencies. The hundreds of American foreign language educators who reviewed and responded to these guidelines during their development have verified that the descriptions represent the reality of what students should be able to do with a foreign language after set amounts of time provided that their instruction is both **standards-based** and **performance-based**. That being the case, teachers should be able to refer to this document, reflect on their students' use of language, and feel that they are "on track." Alternatively, teachers may read the descriptors and determine that their students do not perform at a level consistent with the time and effort spent and, therefore, seek ways of modifying their program to achieve the levels of language performance described.

Classical Languages

The *ACTFL Performance Guidelines for K-12 Learners* are also intended to be applied to the classical languages (Latin and Greek). While often falsely assumed that students of Latin and classical Greek spend all of their instructional time reading and translating, the new performance guidelines provide a further context for a more comprehensive view of the instructional components to be found in such classes. The importance of the three modes of communication (Interpersonal, Interpretive and Presentational) as an applicable principle to the learning of the classical languages is evidenced in the following standards found in the *Standards for Classical Languages*:

- Students read, understand and interpret Latin or Greek.
- Students use orally, listen to, and write Latin or Greek as part of the language learning process.

Therefore, while reading and understanding the written messages of the ancient world is a key to communication in the study of Latin and classical Greek, the oral use of the language can also be employed to build student interest and to heighten understanding of and appreciation for the languages and their cultures.

Less Commonly Taught Languages

The *ACTFL Performance Guidelines for K-12 Learners* have been written to describe realistic language performance for students at the various benchmarks along the instructional sequence. Particularly, they describe performance expected in students who study the western languages most commonly taught in American schools. Students whose native language is English find many similarities between English and the languages of the western world, both in oral and written forms. These similarities aid the students in their acquisition of the new language. Conversely, when students encounter the less commonly taught languages such as Arabic, Chinese, Japanese, Korean, and Russian, new hurdles await them: unfamiliar sounds, different writing systems and new grammars. These linguistic features, which oftentimes cannot be linked to anything the students know in their native language, present challenges and generally tend to extend the language acquisition process. It cannot be expected, therefore, that students learning the less commonly taught languages should reach the same level of performance as those who study the western languages more frequently offered in American schools.

Students acquire their language skills in the controlled and carefully articulated environment of a school classroom.

The ACTFL Performance Guidelines for K-12 Learners

The ACTFL Performance Guidelines for K-12 Learners are contained in the enclosed, full-size poster.* The poster was designed to facilitate the recognition of language performance by language educators and learners:

- across levels of proficiency
- across modes of communication
- across the criteria for accuracy

*(Please remove center staple carefully before opening poster.)

How Are the Guidelines Organized?

Following the organizing principle of *Standards for Foreign Language Learning*, the *ACTFL Performance Guidelines for K-12 Learners* are organized to describe language use as it is characterized by modes of communication: Interpersonal, Interpretive and Presentational. Developers of the standards viewed the use of language "modes" as a richer and more natural way of envisioning communication than the traditional four skills of listening, speaking, reading and writing. Additionally, Brecht and Walton (1994) suggest that looking at these language modes places primary emphasis on the context and purpose of the communication rather than concentrating on any one skill in isolation.

The guidelines account for various entry points that reflect all major language sequences found in the United States.

The **Interpersonal Mode** is characterized by active negotiation of meaning among individuals. Participants observe and monitor one another to see how their meanings and intentions are being communicated. Adjustments and clarifications can be made accordingly. As a result, there is a higher probability of ultimately achieving the goal of successful communication in this mode than in the other two modes. The Interpersonal Mode is most obvious in conversation, but both the interpersonal and negotiated dimensions can be realized through reading and writing, such as the exchange of personal letters or of electronic mail (e-mail) messages.

The **Interpretive Mode** is focused on the appropriate cultural interpretation of meanings that occur in written and spoken form where there is no recourse to the active negotiation of meaning with the writer or the speaker. Such instances of "one-way" reading or listening include the cultural interpretation of texts, movies, radio and television broadcasts, and speeches. Interpreting the cultural meaning of texts, oral or written, must be distinguished from the notion of reading and listening "comprehension," where the term could refer to understanding a text with an American mindset. Put another way, interpretation differs from comprehension in that the former implies the ability to "read (or listen) between the lines."

Since the Interpretive Mode does not allow for active negotiation between the reader and the writer or the listener and the speaker, it requires a much more profound knowledge of culture from the outset. The more one knows about the other language and culture, the greater the chances of creating the appropriate cultural interpretation of a written or spoken text. It must be noted, however, that cultural literacy and the ability to read or listen between the lines are developed over time and through exposure to the language and culture.

The **Presentational Mode** refers to the creation of messages in a manner that facilitates interpretation by members of the other culture where no direct opportunity for the active negotiation of meaning between members of the two cultures exists. Examples include the writing of reports and articles or the presentation of speeches. These examples of "one-way" writing and speaking require a substantial knowledge of language and culture from the outset, since the goal is to make sure that members of the other culture, the audience, will be successful in reading and listening between the lines.

These three modes of communication, then, provide the organizing principle for describing language performance, as evidenced by students at the benchmarks labeled Novice Range, Intermediate Range and Pre-Advanced Range. These benchmarks correlate to students enrolled in K-Grade 4 or Grade 5-8 programs; Grade 9-10 programs; K-Grade 8, Grade 9-12 or Grade 5-12 programs; and K-Grade 12 programs, respectively. These benchmarks also reflect language descriptors as set forth in the Novice, and Intermediate sections of the *ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines*.

To provide the user of these guidelines with as much specificity as is possible and helpful, the language performance descriptors are grouped into the following domains within each of the three modes:

- **Comprehensibility** (How well is the student understood?)
- **Comprehension** (How well does the student understand?)
- **Language Control** (How accurate is the student's language?)
- **Vocabulary** (How extensive and applicable is the student's vocabulary?)
- **Cultural Awareness** (How is the student's cultural knowledge reflected in language use?)
- **Communication Strategies** (How does the student maintain communication?)

Students in the K-12 spectrum are in a continuous process of cognitive development.

(Portions of this section taken from *Standards for Foreign Language Learning: Preparing for the 21st Century* with permission.)

Finding Your Students

The *ACTFL Performance Guidelines for K-12 Learners* reflect how well students perform in the language and the content as outlined in *Standards for Foreign Language Learning*. The standards assume an instructional language path that begins in kindergarten and continues through high school. This may not reflect reality for many school districts, but just as national foreign language standards articulate a vision for the future, so do these *Guidelines* articulate a vision for how well American foreign language learners will perform in those languages as they follow that specified continuum.

Considering the content and the intended K-12 sequence set forth in the *Standards for Foreign Language Learning*, developers of the performance guidelines for students felt obliged to assume that accomplishment of such content standards required students to be enrolled in elementary programs that meet from 3-5 days per week for no less than 30-40 minutes per class; middle school programs that meet daily for no less than 40-50 minutes; and high school programs that equal four units of credit.

Varying learning speeds, biases to certain learning styles and the general language learning ability of students all affect how well second language acquisition will happen.

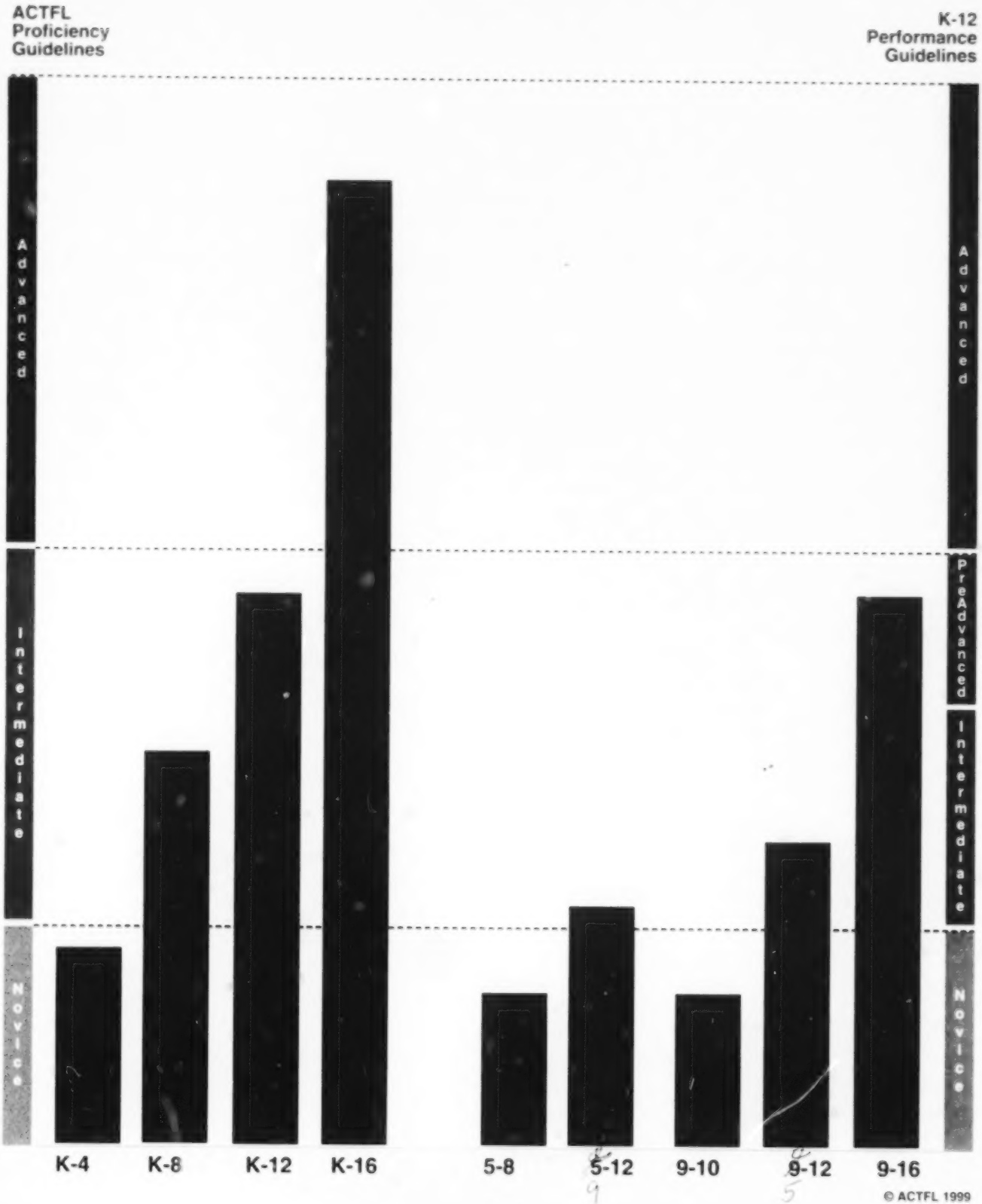
To parallel the national standards, the *ACTFL Performance Guidelines for K-12 Learners* were written primarily to describe the language performance of students who begin foreign language study in kindergarten and continue through Grade 12. And for such programs, these guidelines should adequately describe the full-range of language that students will be able to control at those three benchmark opportunities (Novice, Intermediate and Pre-Advanced) in their K-12 journey.

The present picture of foreign language learning in this country, however, is a long way from that vision. So, where would a high school teacher look to find appropriate language performance descriptions for students who did not begin language study prior to high school? Or what about the middle school teacher whose students start language study in Grade 6? Or an elementary school teacher who provides beginning instruction for Grade 4?

Chart 1 *(see next page)* graphically illustrates the influence of time on language performance ability and shows what ability is reasonable to expect of students who begin foreign language study at various points in the K-16 spectrum. This chart also indicates the relationship between the *ACTFL Performance Guidelines for K-12 Learners* and the *ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines*. While the latter were written to describe abilities of adult-like language users, the former articulate finer gradations within the Novice and Intermediate ranges and, therefore, provide clearer descriptions of the abilities of language users who acquire language in school settings. The *ACTFL Performance Guidelines for K-12 Learners* describe students' language use through the Pre-Advanced level. This is the equivalent of Intermediate High as described in the *ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines*. Once students sustain language ability beyond this level, the *ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines* should be used to describe continued language acquisition through the Superior level.

Realistic Performance Outcomes

Chart 1



Preparing for the 21st Century

- *We must acquire the ability to understand and be understood in the languages of the worldwide neighborhood...*
- *The key to successful communication: knowing how, when, and why to say what to whom...*
- *Students who start earlier have a distinct advantage.*

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...and the hundreds of foreign language professionals who responded to various drafts of the *Guidelines* during their development.

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